

GLOBAL POLITICIAN

Riots in Egypt about Food and Jobs, not about "Freedom" and "Democracy"

Sam Vaknin, Ph.D. - 1/31/2011

In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008-9, riots erupted all over the world, from Thailand to the Ivory Coast and from Yemen to Albania. For some reason, the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt were singled out by the international media and cast as the Middle-Eastern equivalents of the French Revolution involving the overthrow of stale dictators and the eternal cry for freedom and "democracy". Why would Egyptians and Tunisians who have never experienced either freedom or democracy clamour for both was left unexplored.

The truth is far less romantic and much more prosaic: spiralling food prices, resurgent inflation, and growing income disparities between rich and poor gave rise to the discontent that led inexorably to the much-ballyhooed skirmishes. It was about food, not about freedom. Egypt GDP has grown by a respectable 5% in 2010, but the cost of comestibles soared by 17% and unemployment ratcheted up to 9.7%. Egypt's population is inordinately young and is set to double within the next three decades. Hopelessness is a potent combustible: the absence of job prospects weighs more heavily with Egypt's Twitter crowd than their country's noxious psephological record.

Like in dozens of other developing countries, the Egyptians struck a Faustian deal with their rulers: they gave up their liberty in return for personal safety, job security, and middle-class prospects. Mubarak, the country's much-maligned Pharaoh failed to deliver on all three counts. Having thus breached the unwritten social contract, the Egyptians want him to pay the ultimate political price and abdicate humiliatingly.

So, why are they crying out for "freedom" and "democracy"? Because it sounds good on television and because these are the reflexive buzzwords of this post-authoritarian age. They wouldn't know a democracy if it fell in their lap: Egypt has been a military dictatorship since 1952 and an absolutist monarchy prior to that. This is the key to the resolution of this largely artificial crisis: the military will step in; depose of the aging and ailing Mubarak; appoint a caretaker "expert" and "interim" government, headed by one of their own; set an ever-shifting date for "free and fair" elections; freeze food prices; create jobs (with the West's generous assistance); and increase social handouts. Thus pacified, the Egyptian street will revert to its habitual somnolence.

And what about the Muslim Brotherhood? Having been brutally repressed for decades, they are in no shape to pose any serious threat or to constitute any real alternative to the military. This is not to say that, in the longer term, they won't rebound. Egypt may yet end up a theocracy whose dogmatism lies somewhere between Iran and Turkey. But this is not for now.

And what about Egypt's relationship with Israel? Both sides benefit greatly from America's largesse (to the tune of 2-3 billion USD annually each). The Egyptian military is unlikely to give up such a generous endowment. Israel also buys half its natural gas consumption from Egypt. There are intelligence-sharing programs in place. In short: Israel and Egypt are as inextricably intertwined as Israel and Turkey. Prognosis: a cold front ahead, but no stormy conditions.

"Democracy", Egyptian-style

Sam Vaknin, Ph.D. - 2/1/2011

The revenant (many would say ersatz) Egyptian, Mohamed ElBaradei, self-appointed and self-imputed leader of the "democracy" movement in his newly-discovered homeland, called yesterday on the army to commit a putsch against the government. The fawning, cliché-ridden, politically-correct, navel-gazing, and effete media in the West did not question this abrupt ideological shift: ElBaradei and the protesters in Tahrir Square have always claimed to be upholding Western values. Now, they are calling for yet another round of military dictatorship to replace Mubarak's. This is not reminiscent of other people's power revolutions, including the most recent one in Tunisia which is said to have inspired the Egyptian tumult.

The sad truth is that Omar Suleiman, Egypt's much-reviled Vice-President, is right; Egyptians are not ready for a democracy because they have never had one and because they are politically immature.

Recent trends such multiculturalism, political correctness, crowdsourcing (culling knowledge from the aggregated knowledge of computer users), and diversity are perceived as antidotes, counterweights, and forms of protest against the elitism and rationalism that led to the murderous authoritarian ideologies and regimes of the 20th centuries; to climate-changing pollution; and to the nuclear arsenal. The "people" now reassert themselves by seizing control of functions hitherto reserved to the few. This backlash and technology-driven revolution are widely equated with the restoration of "true democracy".

Yet, democracy is not the rule of the people. Democracy is government by periodically vetted representatives of the people. Democracy is not tantamount to a continuous expression of the popular will as it pertains to a range of issues. Functioning and fair democracy is representative and not participatory. Participatory "people power" is mob rule (ochlocracy), not democracy.

Granted, "people power" is often required in order to establish democracy where it is unprecedented. Revolutions - velvet, rose, orange, and jasmine - recently introduced democracy in Eastern Europe and Tunisia, for instance. People power - mass street demonstrations - toppled obnoxious dictatorships from Iran to the Philippines and from Peru to Indonesia.

But once the institutions of democracy are in place and more or less functional, the people can and must rest. They should let their chosen delegates do the job they were elected to do. And they must hold their emissaries responsible and accountable in fair and free ballots once every two or four or five years.

Democracy and the rule of law are bulwarks against "the tyranny of the mighty (the privileged elites)". But, they should not yield a "dictatorship of the weak".

As heads of the state in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and East Europe can attest, these vital lessons are lost on the dozens of "new democracies" the world over. Many of these presidents and prime ministers, though democratically elected (multiply, in some cases), have fallen prey to enraged and vigorous "people power" movements in their countries.

And these breaches of the democratic tradition are not the only or most egregious ones.

The West boasts of the three waves of democratization that swept across the world since 1975. Yet, in most developing countries and nations in transition, "democracy" is an empty word. Granted, the hallmarks of democracy are there: candidate lists, parties, election propaganda, a plurality of media, and voting. But its quiddity is absent. The democratic principles are institutions are being consistently hollowed out and rendered mock by election fraud, exclusionary policies, cronyism, corruption, intimidation, and collusion with Western interests, both commercial and political.

The new "democracies" are thinly-disguised and criminalized plutocracies (recall the Russian oligarchs), authoritarian regimes (Central Asia and the Caucasus), or pupeteered heterarchies (Macedonia, Bosnia, and Iraq, to mention three recent examples).

The new "democracies" suffer from many of the same ills that afflict their veteran role models: murky campaign finances; venal revolving doors between state administration and private enterprise; endemic corruption, nepotism, and cronyism; self-censoring media; socially, economically, and politically excluded minorities; and so on. But while this malaise does not threaten the foundations of the United States and France - it does imperil the stability and future of the likes of Ukraine, Serbia, and Moldova, Indonesia, Mexico, and Bolivia.

Many nations have chosen prosperity over democracy. Yes, the denizens of these realms can't speak their mind or protest or criticize or even joke lest they be arrested or worse - but, in exchange for giving up these trivial freedoms, they have food on the table, they are fully employed, they receive ample health care and proper education, they save and spend to their hearts' content.

In return for all these worldly and intangible goods (popularity of the leadership which yields political stability; prosperity; security; prestige abroad; authority at home; a renewed sense of nationalism, collective and community), the citizens of these countries forgo the right to be able to criticize the regime or change it once every four

years. Many insist that they have struck a good bargain - not a Faustian one.

Worse still, the West has transformed the ideal of democracy into an ideology at the service of imposing a new colonial regime on its former colonies. Spearheaded by the United States, the white and Christian nations of the West embarked with missionary zeal on a transformation, willy-nilly, of their erstwhile charges into profitable paragons of "democracy" and "good governance".

And not for the first time. Napoleon justified his gory campaigns by claiming that they served to spread French ideals throughout a barbarous world. Kipling bemoaned the "White Man's (civilizing) burden", referring specifically to Britain's role in India. Hitler believed himself to be the last remaining barrier between the hordes of Bolshevism and the West. The Vatican concurred with him.

This self-righteousness would have been more tolerable had the West actually meant and practiced what it preached, however self-delusionally. Yet, in dozens of cases in the last 60 years alone, Western countries intervened, often by force of arms, to reverse and nullify the outcomes of perfectly legal and legitimate popular and democratic elections. They did so because of economic and geopolitical interests and they usually installed rabid dictators in place of the deposed elected functionaries.

This hypocrisy cost them dearly. Few in the poor and developing world believe that the United States or any of its allies are out to further the causes of democracy, human rights, and global peace. The nations of the West have sown cynicism and they are reaping strife and terrorism in return.

Moreover, democracy is far from what it is made out to be. Confronted with history, the myth breaks down.

For instance, it is maintained by their chief proponents that democracies are more peaceful than dictatorships. But the two most belligerent countries in the world are, by a wide margin, Israel and the United States (closely followed by the United Kingdom). As of late, China is one of the most tranquil polities.

Democracies are said to be inherently stable (or to successfully incorporate the instability inherent in politics). This, too, is a confabulation. The Weimar Republic gave birth to Adolf Hitler and Italy had almost 50 governments in as many years. The bloodiest civil wars in history erupted in Republican Spain and, seven decades earlier, in the United States. Czechoslovakia, the USSR, and Yugoslavia imploded upon becoming democratic, having survived intact for more than half a century as tyrannies.

Democracies are said to be conducive to economic growth (indeed, to be a prerequisite to such). But the fastest economic growth rates in history go to imperial Rome, Nazi Germany, Stalin's USSR, Putin's Russia, and post-Mao China.

Granted, democracy allows for the free exchange of information and, thus, renders markets more efficient and local-level bureaucracies less corrupt. This ought to be conducive to economic growth. But who says that the airing of municipal grievances and the exchange of non-political (business and economic) ideas cannot be achieved in a dictatorship?

Even in North Korea, only the Dear Leader is above criticism and reproach - all others: politicians, civil servants, party hacks, and army generals can become and are often the targets of grassroots criticism and purges. The ruling parties in most tyrannies are umbrella organizations that represent the pluralistic interests of numerous social and economic segments and strata. For many people, this approximation of democracy - the party as a "Big Tent" - is a more than satisfactory solution to their need to be heard.

Finally, how represented is the vox populi even in established democracies?

In a democracy, people can freely protest and make their opinions known, no doubt. Sometimes, they can even change their representatives (though the rate of turnover in the US Congress in the last two decades is lower than it was in the last 20 years of the Politburo).

But is this a sufficient incentive (or deterrent)? The members of the various elites in Western democracies are mobile - they ceaselessly and facilely hop from one lucrative sinecure to another. Lost the elections as a Senator? How about a multi-million dollar book contract, a consultant position with a firm you formerly oversaw or regulated, your own talk show on television, a cushy job in the administration?

The truth is that voters are powerless. The rich and mighty take care of their own. Malfeasance carries little risk and rarely any sanction. Western democracies are ossified bastions of self-perpetuating interest groups aided and abetted and legitimized by the ritualized spectacle that we call "elections". And don't you think the denizens of Africa and Asia and eastern Europe and the Middle East are blissfully unaware of this charade.

Moreover, as the United States is re-discovering in Iraq and Israel in Palestine, maintaining democratic institutions and empire-building are incompatible activities. History repeatedly shows that one cannot preserve a democratic core in conjunction with an oppressed periphery of colonial real estate.

The role of imperial power entails the suppression, subversion, or manipulation of all forms of free speech, governance, and elections. It usually involves unsavory practices such as torture, illegal confinement, assassinations, and collusion with organized crime. Empires typically degenerate into an abyss of corruption, megalomaniacal projects, deceit, paranoia, and self-directed aggression.

The annals of both Rome and Britain teach us that, as democracy grows entrenched, empires disintegrate fitfully. Rome chose to keep its empire by sacrificing its republic. Britain chose to democratize by letting go of its unwieldy holdings overseas. Both polities failed to uphold their erstwhile social institutions while they grappled with their smothering possessions.

And true democracy is on the retreat.

From Venezuela to Thailand, democratic regimes are being toppled by authoritarian substitutes: the military, charismatic left-wingers, or mere populists. Even in the USA, the bastion of constitutional rule, civil and human rights are being alarmingly eroded (though not without precedent in wartime).

The prominent ideologues of liberal democracy have committed a grave error by linking themselves inextricably with the doctrine of freemarketry and the emerging new order of globalization. As Thomas Friedman correctly observes in "The Lexus and the Olive Tree", both strains of thought are strongly identified with the United States of America (USA).

Thus, liberal democracy came to be perceived by the multitudes as a ruse intended to safeguard the interests of an emerging, malignantly narcissistic empire (the USA) and of rapacious multinationals. Liberal democracy came to be identified with numbing, low-brow cultural homogeneity, encroachment on privacy and the individual, and suppression of national and other idiosyncratic sentiments.

Liberal democracy came to be confused and confuted with neo-colonial exploitation, social Darwinism, and the crumbling of social compacts and long-standing treaties, both explicit and implicit. It even came to be associated with materialism and a bewildering variety of social ills: rising crime rates, unemployment, poverty, drug addiction, prostitution, organ trafficking, monopolistic behavior, corporate malfeasance, and other antisocial forms of conduct.

Moreover, rapacious Anglo-Saxon capitalism, ostensibly based on the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest, and natural selection did not provide the panacea it promised to all ills, social and economic. Instead, prone to systemic crises, it repeatedly seemed to threaten the very architecture and fabric of the global order: market and regulatory failures forced the hand of even the most fervent laissez-faire regimes to nationalize, bailout, and implement Keynesian stimulatory measures. By comparison, the economic systems of statist-authoritarian polities seemed to provide the private sector with a smoother trajectory of development.

This is the paradox: unbridled capitalism always leads to state intervention and ownership (as the crisis of the financial system in the USA in 2008 has proven yet again) - while state ownership and intervention seem to give rise to flourishing forms of capitalism (for instance, in China and Russia).

The backlash was, thus, inevitable.

The traditional mercantilist roles of colonizer and colonies were inverted over the last few decades. For millennia, colonial empires consisted of a center which consumed raw materials and produced and sold finished goods to the periphery whose role was to extract minerals and cultivate commodities, edible and not.

in the wake of the Second World War (a failed German colonial experiment in the heartland of Europe) and as a result of escalating scarcity, caused by a variety of economic and geopolitical factors, the center of geopolitical-military gravity shifted to the producers and owners of mineral and agricultural wealth.

These countries have outsourced and offshored the manufacturing of semi-finished and finished products to the poorest corners of the Earth. Thus, in stark contrast to the past, nowadays, "colonies" spew out a stream of consumer goods and consume raw materials imported from their colonial masters.

Colonial relationships are no longer based on bayonets and are mostly commercial in nature. Still, it is not difficult to discern 19th century patterns in these 21st century exchanges with one of the parties dominant and supreme and the other obsequious and subservient and with the economic benefits flowing and accruing inexorably in one direction.

The unraveling of the financial system of the United States in 2007-8 only served to speed up the process as American prime assets were snatched up at bargain basement prices by Asian and Middle-Eastern powerhouses and sovereign wealth funds.

[Sam Vaknin](#) is the author of *Malignant Self Love - Narcissism Revisited* and *After the Rain - How the West Lost the East* as well as many other books and ebooks about topics in psychology, relationships, philosophy, economics, and international affairs. He served as a columnist for *Central Europe Review*, *Global Politician*, *PopMatters*, *eBookWeb*, and *Bellaonline*, and as a *United Press International (UPI)* Senior Business Correspondent. He was the editor of mental health and Central East Europe categories in *The Open Directory and Suite101*. Visit Sam's Web site at <http://samvak.tripod.com> You can download 30 of his free ebooks in <http://www.narcissistic-abuse.com/freebooks.html>.

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